

How I Learned to “Chaw” Tobacco

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You'll have to be a real old timer to remember this evolution of “rocket-scientific” thought in the hierarchy of the Corps. In all fairness, there was a bit of left handed logic in the thinking, but then it predated helicopter re-supply, and the Navy Medical folks still had sulfa powder stashed in our first aid packets (albeit with a crude typed note taped to the tin cautioning you not to use it on wounds).

Aircraft Carriers still were the more or less exclusive roosting place of fixed wing aircraft, and Bacitracin Ointment for the topical use on wounds was still in the future. We were still carrying the M1 Rifle, and the M1941 Pack with reversible camouflage patterns on the shelter-halves, and helmet covers were still the norm, often causing the somewhat heated arguments between units and individuals during the fall and spring as to whether or not an outfit should fall out with green or brown side out. We still called our utilities (made out of the traditional herringbone material) “dungarees” and wore the jackets outside the trousers until the late 1950s. While a bit archaic today, such machinations made good sense at the time and ...we still won our wars!

Now in training assignments stateside, or even when deployed in large units overseas, we usually had access to a 250-gallon water trailer of potable water, known to the troops far and wide as the “Water Buffalo” or in slang, “The Water Boo”... This was fine in static situations, but when far from chimney smoke as the old saying goes, you were on your own.

In the old days we were issued a single canteen, although on some of the Pacific Operations photographs exist showing two canteens on the cartridge or pistol belts. The problem however was that you had to plan for the worst, and with no re-supply “choppers” you often had to make long arduous patrols with the single canteen. Halazone water purification tablets existed of course, but if you had no access to an occasional stream or even stagnant pond, you might be SOL (\$hi+ outta' luck) as the old saying goes. The Hospital Corpsmen spoke knowingly about the use of a few drops of iodine in your canteen, but then who in Hades carried a bottle of iodine. Nope, there had to be a better answer, and the military hierarchy came up with something called “water discipline” based on the idea that the human body could be trained to keep going in stressful situations on a single canteen (one quart) of water per day! Dear Allah... It was almost as if the medicos and the military brass figured that much like the Camel, the human body could be trained to operate on minimal water! Hummm... I recall in OCS at Quantico on two separate occasions I am aware of, we had two Officer Candidates die of Heat Stroke (that must have been a nightmare to explain to the families)! None the less, this was in effect at least through the late 1950s. Somebody should have had better sense!

The drill was that you were not allowed to drink out of your canteen except when given permission by your squad or platoon leader (depending on the size of your operating unit at the time. Solution? Trick f++k your body into thinking it wasn't thirsty or at least cutting down on the sometimes overwhelming desire to suck on your canteen! How did we do such a thing? Well, there were several schools of thought, one of which was to put a couple of pebbles in your mouth to keep your saliva glands activated, or the easiest (and most macho)

version was to stick a “chaw” of tobacco in your mouth – THAT was guaranteed to keep your mouth moist! I bought my first pouch of Beechnut (my personal choice, although Red Man and several types of “plug” tobacco also found favor). I bought my first pouch at the small PX at Camp Geiger in the Summer of 1956 at ITR. Since I was a squad leader, I had to maintain an aura of authority and invincibility – yeah, right, if you don’t think I got as “bloody” thirsty as the next guy, I’ll eat your hat. While the “Water Boos” were fairly common in the training areas, we were not allowed to use them while we proved we could “Camelesque” our bodies (often at Quantico at OCS, no trailers were readily available on what we called “The Hill Trail” and we were usually on it at a dead run for about 7 miles. There may be hotter spots in the States than Quantico, Virginia, but I’ll be damned if I ever found one in the early days at least!

After several days of learning to live with my ever present pouch of “Beechnut” I became inured to, if not downright fond of the flavor (the fact that I was a cigar smoker even when I was a kid may have helped). My habit of keeping a pouch of the vile stuff in my ready gear stayed with me until I got used to Helicopter water re-supply in Vietnam in the mid to late 1960s. One extremely hot afternoon during ITR at Camp Geiger almost cured me of my tobacco chewing habit!

We were running continual squad assaults on a fortified position, and just generally practicing running, hitting the deck using your rifle-butt to break your fall, and rolling to one side or the other to confuse the enemy who would have been firing at you. After numerous evolutions of this more or less standard drill, we began to get a bit careless, and if possible sneaking a look at our timepieces to see when this continuing insanity was going to stop. It proved to be a tactical miscalculation!

On what should have been the end of the exercise, I was feeling “froggy” and hit the deck with a particularly energetic flop – with about a fist sized rock catching me right in the solar plexus! Upppsssss... I inadvertently and quite accidentally swallowed my entire cud of Beechnut. Now I know you’ve all heard the stories of turning green when you swallow a chaw of tobacco, but I have an entirely different perspective! What actually happens is that your eyeballs glaze over green, and everything you look at has a distinctly green tint! Arrrgggg... While I managed to salvage my dignity and not overtly puke all over the simulated battlefield, it was a true act of bodily control. I couldn’t spit the damned thing out, it was all in my stomach, and it was letting me know about it in spades! I declared that it was time to take a slight swig of canteen water for the squad, and used my entire swig to wash out my mouth – I don’t think my stomach could have handled it!

For about a week after my “chaw” swallowing adventure, I became a “pebbles in the mouth” man, although I didn’t let on to the squad (how embarrassing that would have been!). After about a week of trying small pieces of Beechnut in the mouth when close to a water fountain/scuttlebutt, I finally got to where my body didn’t instantly reject/eject the stuff I was trying to get used to. Eventually I finally got back into full blown tobacco chewing, but it was an object lesson of epic proportions! You have no idea how relieved I was when the military and military medics decided that the human body *COULDN'T* be trained to go without water, but the old concept of “Water Discipline” was without foundation and basically idiotic! Hallelujah, by Vietnam we were teaching everyone to drink all they could hold and take a couple of extra swigs – while not perfect, your body CAN hold more water than it needs at that particular period of time.

Whenever we had any casualties occurred, none left on the medivac choppers without having at least one canteen stripped off his web gear. We were also occasionally issued (or stole) one of the newer 5-quart bladder canteens that you could sling over your shoulder. I rarely went on an operation without at least 3 standard canteens on my belt and one of the 5-quart bladder canteens over my shoulder. Lessons learned as a 20-year old squad leader die hard, and I always made sure my kids never sent any of the 5-gallon water re-supply cans from our helicopter re-supply leave the zone with any moisture remaining in them. We sometimes slobbered when we initially strode off into the jungle, but old lessons die hard.

As far as I know the old 250-gallon Water Boo is still in the inventory, as well it should be, as helicopter water re-supply would be a bit of an affectation in a garrison or enclave situation, but they still bring back memories of the *Olde Corps*... Thank Gawd the brass doesn't still have the old "Camelesque" mentality, but 'twasn't always so. Kinda' like the old shout of "*The Word's Been Changed, It's Green Side Out*" – if nothing else, to this old Marine, both are a vivid reminder of our not so distant roots. Someday I may have a pouch of Beechnut bronzed and put on my shelf as a reminder of one hot afternoon at Camp Geiger in 1956.

Semper Fi,

ROC